

## CORNISH NAMES FOR MOTHS

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On the weekend of 21/22 August, the organisation for Cornish language for children called Dalleth (which means “beginning” in Cornish) arranged a camp for children at An Gresen Gernewek, Cusgarne, Truro, which is run by Loveday Jenkin. One of the activities arranged for their education was a moth trapping evening led by Adrian Spalding. The m.v. light was set up on a sheet in the corner of a field, near a hedge of sycamore, but gardens nearby provided a more diverse habitat with elder, dead elms, thistles, nettles, brambles, heather etc. As the moths came in, we attempted to give Cornish names to them, in most cases a literal translation from the English, thus elephant hawk-moth would be Hok-olyfans. In Cornish, the adjective comes after the noun, thus we get Tyger Ruby. We only caught one moth without an English name (*Agriphila tristella* D. & S.), but in fact H.N. Humphreys and J.O. Westood in their *British Moths and their Transformations* (1843-1845) called it the dusky yellow veneer, the name we use here. No rare moths were found.

The name small phoenix posed a problem. Most English moth names are descriptive, but the meaning of the English name here is rather fanciful. R.D. Macleod in his *Key to the names of British Butterflies and Moths* suggests that “Phoenix” is used because of the resemblance of the band on the forewings to smoking fire. The Latin name *Ecliptopera silaceata* comes from the words *eclipses* meaning deficient and *peras* meaning tip (from the blunt tip of the forewings), and from *silaceus* meaning ochre-like (from the colour of the forewings). However, we decided that the most distinctive feature was the shape of the broken median bar on the forewing, and so we gave the name Kelgh Callen to the small phoenix (meaning the vein of iron ochre in the shape of a circle). It is of interest to note that in the *British Butterfly Conservation Society News* No 38, there is a list of Welsh names for butterflies, sent in by Mrs Lynne Harrison. In it, most of the Welsh names are literal translations from the English, although some are not, such as painted lady (Iar Fach Dramor meaning butterfly from across the sea).

As far as we are aware, there are no records of Cornish names for moths or butterflies, (although there are for birds, plants, animals and fish). The dialect word “piskey” was used to signify small white night-flying moths (perhaps embodying the spirits of the dead). The last known native Cornish speaker, for whom Cornish was the first language, was Dolly Pentreath, who died in 1777, but Cornish survived in texts and literature and probably the spoken word. It is now spoken by many people in Cornwall and throughout the world, with many children brought up to speak it in their home.

\*Tregarne, Cusgarne, Truro.

**Tykk-dew nos (butterfly of the night) — an illustrative list**

**Pyralidae**

1305	dusky yellow veneer	Launians Melen Godewl
1405	mother of pearl	Crogen Perl
1413	gold triangle	Tryhorn Ow'r

**Lasiocampidae**

1640	drinker	Sughaner
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**Geometridae**

1689	mullein wave	Ton Molen
1728	garden carpet	Lurlen an Lowarth
1777	July highflyer	Ughel-nyja Gortheren
1759	small phoenix	Kelgh Callen
1846	narrow-winged pug	Coryk Askel Yn
1858	the v-pug	Coryk-V-
1906	brimstone moth	An Loskven
1937	willow beauty	Tekter Helygen

**Lymantriidae**

2033	black arches	Gwaregow Du
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**Arctiidae**

2050	common footman	Paja Kemyn
2064	ruby tiger	Tyger Ruby

**Noctuidae**

2102	flame shoulder	Scoth Flam
2107	large yellow underwing	Ys-askel Melen Mur an vrasa
2109	lesser yellow underwing	Ys-askel Melen Byghanna
2111	lesser broad-bordered yellow underwing	Ys-askel Melen Myn Ledan Byghanna
2123	small square-spot	Bythen Carrek Byghan
2321	dark arches	Gwaregow Tawl
2342	rosy minor	Myjyn Lyw Ros
2343	common rustic	Tythyak Kemyn
2353	flounced rustic	Tythyak Cryghyllys
2441	silver y	Y Arghans
2450	the spectacle	Spectaclys
2474	straw dot	Nam Cala
2477	the snout	Tronek

The order and numbers are taken from *A Recorder's Log Book and Label List of British Butterflies and Moths* by J.D. Bradley and D.S. Fletcher.

**References**

- Harrison, L., 1987. Welsh Names for British Butterflies, *British Butterfly Conservation Society News* No. 38:26-28.
- Humphreys, H.N. & Westwood, J.O., 1843. *British Moths and Their Transformations*, William Smith, London.
- Macleod, R.D., 1959. *Key to the names of British Butterflies and Moths*, Issac Pitman & Sons, London.